

V.

NOTES
OF A
FUNERAL SERMON
ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF
MR. WILLIAM G. CLARKE,
OF
SPARTANBURG DISTRICT,
DELIVERED AT PROVIDENCE CHURCH, NEAR LIMESTONE SPRINGS,
ON THE LORD'S DAY, AUGUST 5, 1855,
BY THOS. CURTIS, D.D.

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Our smitten friends are messengers of peace;  
For us they sicken, and for us they die.  
YOUNG.  
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COLUMBIA, S. C.:
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CORRESPONDENCE.

September 2d, 1855.

DEAR BROTHER CURTIS:

The high appreciation that we place upon the Sermon, delivered by you at Providence Church, in memory of our friend and neighbor, Mr. William G. Clarke, on the first Sabbath in August past, has induced us to respectfully solicit a copy of the same for publication; thinking that it will be of incalculable value to our denomination, and a timely admonition to all evil doers to cease from the evil of their ways, and seek mercy while it may be found; that others may be enabled to exclaim in the language of the text: "Is not this truly a brand plucked out of the fire?"

Respectfully, yours in the bonds of the Gospel,

(Signed.)

J. G. GAFFNEY,
T. W. GAFFNEY,
J. R. ELLIS,
S. A. CAMP,
J. U. SARRATT,
JNO. BYERS,
S. C. COOPER,
A. HARRIS.

Rev. Thos. Curtis, D.D., Limestone Springs.

LIMESTONE SPRINGS, September, 1855.

TO MESSRS. J. G. GAFFNEY, T. W. GAFFNEY, J. R. ELLIS, &c., &c.

DEAR BRETHREN: Herewith you will receive a copy of the Sermon you request. I would humbly hope it may accomplish some of the good ends you propose, and remain

Yours affectionately in the Gospel,

THOS. CURTIS.

SERMON.

Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?—ZACH. III., 2.

THE Holy Spirit thinks it important to tell us, that the earliest name of a prophet was a *seer*. (“Before time in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, thus he spake, come, and let us go to the seer; for he that is now called a prophet, was before time called a seer.”*) It would mean, not only that he saw things, and future events very often, which other men did not see, but that he saw them as plainly, vividly and certainly, as though they were actually passing before his eyes. Hence you read so often of the visions of the prophets; and in the Lamentations of Jeremiah: “Her prophets find no vision from the Lord.” You are not to confound these with the visions and dreams of uninspired men, ancient or modern. They are always uncertain, and, as far as men depend upon them in religion, impositions or delusions, for the most part. But those of the prophets were so called from their absolute certainty; their being visible in the eye of God, and by His Spirit made so to the eye of the prophet’s mind.

Our text occurs in one of these. The prophet is of course entirely engaged and engrossed with it. He has ears to hear and eyes to see the deliverance of his people from Babylon, in chap. ii. Now he sees a happy change in their spiritual character. God always proceeds in this way with his people—never changing merely their outward condition; but giving them also the changed and new heart, which alone can make them truly enjoy any outward state.

The text is part of a remarkable kind of dialogue. The speakers are most remarkable, and most opposed; the doctrine is remarkable, and the issue remarkable. Jehovah, represented by his angel, is here—perfect holiness and truth, and the fountain of these to his creatures. Satan, the worst and the chief of all unholy beings; and Joshua, the official representative of God’s people, at this time, partaking measurably the character of both. If in words Satan does not speak, by his position and actions he does. What are these, but “to resist” both

* 1 Samuel, ix., 9.

God's design, and his people's salvation; what but to be their "accuser," as in the book of Revelation he is said to be (to "accuse us before God day and night;") and as we have him presented in the earlier case of Job? Then God also encounters this enemy—"Hast thou considered my servant Job?" . . . If Satan is not thus impliedly active, why this strong and double "rebuke" of him here? Job, the oldest book of the Bible, then, having a similar scene, and the Revelation of St. John, the latest book, a similar doctrine, I shall consider the great Christian truth, of the necessity of a change of heart to be taught here; and show how far it is applicable to the case before us—the death of our friend.

I offer two further preliminary remarks. These words establish the real existence and occupations of Satan. Here is God himself, Joshua, Satan. Are not the first two real beings, and in *their* natural place and occupation? God delighting in mercy, and Joshua seeking that mercy for himself and his people? Surely, then, here is, in the apostle Peter's language, "*Our* adversary, the devil, going about seeking whom he may devour." If some classes of modern Christians, so called, deny this, (and all of us too often forget it,) the Jewish Church knew the doctrine, remember; and that none can serve Satan better, than by denying or concealing him, as thus busy. It will aid him in his efforts to make us deny the Lord himself; and that the Lord may deny us when He shall come! The prince of darkness reigns, of course, in the dark.

Our other remark is, on the negative form of this text; or its being altogether a question—"Is *not* this?" You must see, on reflection, that this is the strongest form of asserting what it asks, especially as the language of a holy and reconciled God to the enemy of our souls. "Is this not so?" it intends. "Durst even thou deny it? Thou who 'would'st deny any thing of favorable truth to this trembling sinner? 'Who would'st shrink from no effective lie. Canst thou venture on so 'huge a lie, as to deny the changed character of this man and leader 'of men?"

I now enquire for the general doctrine of this question or case; then briefly apply it. And

I. As to the doctrine. Taking these words with the context we have 1st. A lively description of every sinner that is saved *before* he is a saved man; and 2d. A lively description of *how* he is saved.

I invite and charge you to hear for yourselves, to which ever of these classes you belong! You may never have a more impressive and favorable opportunity. The whole subject is well suited to your protracted meeting; and some of you know my doctrine respecting funeral dis-

courses. They are for the benefit of the living, and to teach them how to die. Not to praise the dead; nor yet to condemn them, or deal harshly with their memory. On the one hand, truth is never to be sacrificed; nor religion, to any man's want of religion, living or dead. On the other hand, the faults and sins of the dead are not to be sought for, or alluded to, more than is strictly needful for our profit.

1. Here is a lively, faithful description of every sinful man as such. In the context he is "clothed in filthy garments." This is Joshua's attire, representing, collectively, the sins of his people. You have the moral foundation of this picture of that people in Daniel ix., where, just before this period, the prophet confesses, "To us belong shame and confusion of faces;" and no sin is forgiven in or out of the Church, collectively or individually, but in one way. It must be brought out before the angel of the Lord; be exposed at least to the individual as to God and to Satan.

Sin is our only moral filthiness—our "own sin," which "will be sure," as Moses says, "to find us out," and to be brought out as filthy, in mercy or in judgment. It is the constant Scriptural figure for personal sin. Man is "abominable and filthy" because "he drinketh in iniquity as the ox drinketh in water." "They are altogether become filthy." "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags." The filthiness of Jerusalem is said to be "molten," or melted "into it." There is filthiness of the flesh and filthiness of the spirit, spoken of; filthy lewdness; filthy lucre, (money made, in the love of it, the root of all evil,) and "filthy communications out of the mouth." Some of the strongest of these texts describe, not the Gentile world only, but the Jewish world also. What can better describe the characteristic sins of many in our day? Those of the incorrigible drunkard and glutton; various unbridled desires and passions; filthy language; dirty frauds and dishonesty—confined to no class of society; cheating friends and brethren, now for a few dollars or cents; now for thousands of dollars? It is all the same filthy thing. And as all filthiness spreads itself, and pollutes all it comes near, men are said to pollute God's holy name when they take it any way in vain; to pollute his Sabbaths and his Sanctuary, when they break the one, and come with all their unrepented sins into the other. Violent and angry men "pollute themselves with blood," and even, as our Lord teaches, with bloody thoughts. So that he that hateth his brother, or is even angry with him without a cause, is in danger of a murderer's judgment.

But many things that appear fair and decent, yea, "that are highly esteemed among men, are an abomination," as He assures us, "in the

sight of God." The poor "sinner" of a woman, that came "behind" our Lord in the Pharisee's house, because she durst not come before him, and the self-righteous company there—were her moral garments so filthy in the Saviour's eyes as the long robes of hypocrisy which the Pharisees wore; and their pretence of making long prayers? No. And people have a strange way, still, of covering up filthy garments, (as God sees them,) that is bad moral characters, in coats and cloaks of hypocrisy. They are made of all kinds of materials—silk, cotton and gauze; and are of all fashions, sizes and prices. Baptist cloaks of this kind are found; Methodist, Presbyterian and Episcopalian; some so short, and others so thin, that the filthy garments are continually peeping from under or through them. Ancient cases are renewed in modern practice. Judas is the type of a too permanent character in the Church; the covetous and dishonest disciple, covered by the pretence of benevolence; "caring for the poor" his outside garment or pretension, robbing the bag, and selling the Master, his true garb of character. The Evangelist seems to see it peeping forth, in using the expression, "*not* that he cared for the poor;" for Satan was then entering his heart. When he takes full possession of it, the outer garment falls, and the thief and traitor stand out in all their filthiness. Other modes of covering filthy garments, still seen, are those of Ananias and Sapphira, putting on the robe of liberality to the Church; and Simon Magus, that of desires for the Holy Spirit, or to become eminently religious—the whole being liars to the Holy Ghost, as are all who have a form of godliness without the power.

Of all our filthy garments of sin, then, it may be said, "There is nothing hid which shall not be manifested; neither any thing kept secret but that it shall come abroad." Filthy before men is all sin seen to be, sooner or later; filthier in the eye of a man's conscience, whenever and wherever conscience wakes up (and some men's will only awake in hell)—then we see ourselves more filthy than others see us, as Job, chap. xlii., 5, 6.—filthiest of all in the eyes of God! In the day "when God shall judge the secrets of men," how many will appear in these garments that now pass (pass, perhaps, through life) as well clothed and decent characters.

Two practical remarks before we proceed! 1st. The text preaches, not a partial, but a total, personal depravity, as the true doctrine of sin. Not sin a soiled garment, or a patch work of clean and unclean character; not a garment "spotted" only, "by the flesh." But 2d. One of such entire filthiness that it must be removed entirely (as we shall see) or *we* see no salvation. The Psalmist therefore prays, "Wash me

thoroughly from mine iniquity ;” and the prophet speaks of the Gospel day as that “in which the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion by the spirit of judgment and by the spirit of burning.” That cannot want such a thorough process of cleansing which is not thoroughly, deeply, and in grain, defiled.

But the lively description of the sinner is continued under another figure. He is a *brand plucked out of the fire* ; therefore, first presented, in fact, as a brand *in* the fire. (Another proof how plain Scripture is, in every thing relating to sin and salvation ; savages know the use and abuse of fire—fire their servant, and fire their master.) In the fire of his “own sin” and sinful desires. Men are “consumed in” and by their iniquity, like Sodom ; which was destroyed by this element to show the nature of its sins. The storm or wrath divine, as travellers tell us, has left its fiery marks in the earth to this day. They are “consumed one of another.” Wicked ungoverned tongues are said to “set on fire the whole course of nature and to be set on fire of hell.” It is a fire, as Job says, “that consumeth to destruction.” They are found in the fire, the spreading fire, both of the guilt of sin and the misery of sin. You know how long a fire will lie concealed, smouldering and spreading and stealing on its way—yet doing, all the time, its thorough work in the timbers of a house or barn—before it bursts out. This is just like sin. Every sinner thinks, for a length of time, that *he* can conceal it and keep it under ; until it becomes his master, and “there is no remedy” with creatures. Come out, now, ye poor firemen of unbelievers, and misbelievers in your own works, or in your priestly prayers and forgivenesses, or in other people’s prayers !—Ye may play upon this fire all your little squirts and syringes, or pour upon it pail-fulls of blasphemy and scorn—what do they all avail ? As much, to change the figure, as if you were to fire a child’s pop-gun against the rising tide, or raging waves of the sea !

Then there is the fire of God’s wrath against sin, and the fire of hell begun in a guilty conscience (which is but a portion of that wrath) in both of which every unrenewed sinner is found. The apostle offers it as the great reason for preaching God’s righteousness by faith, that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” To this the prophet alludes when he asks, “Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire ;” and God, because his ministers are bound to speak of it, in its place, asks, “Is not my word a fire and a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces ?” Therefore, saith the apostle, “knowing the terror (or terribleness) of the Lord we persuade men.” The terrors of a guilty conscience arise from

this terror; and anticipate a future world, accordingly, with a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation. It is all that remains to us, if we have no sacrifice for sin in Christ. And this is of the very nature of “the worm that dieth not, and the fire that never shall be quenched”—that on which our Lord dwells repeatedly—calling it by the plain terms—“hell-fire.”

II. We come to a more pleasing part of the text: A lively description of how every redeemed sinner is saved.

Take, as we have thus far done, the last figure first. The filthy garments are taken from him. They are not half-washed only; nor entirely washed. They are taken away. “I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee.” When a man’s garments, by dirty and hard work, are worn filthy and threadbare to a certain degree, he casts them off and away. They are past cleaning; unfit for wearing at all any longer. “Thou shalt call his name *Jesus*, for he shall save his people *from their sins*.” Some enquirers after religion have a great desire to save their sins. All would save some of them for awhile. In this state of mind *these persons* cannot be saved. You must part with all your sins, or with your Saviour, and all hopes of salvation by him—as his very name tells you.

The filthy garments are removed by divine command. Man may be the agent of this great change—ministers or others. But twice, yea thrice, is it attributed in this text to God. “*He* answered and said to those who stood by, take away the filthy garments,” “*I* have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee.” “*I* will clothe thee with change of raiment.” It is a divine work or worth nothing. It is the father’s love, you know, in the parable, that calls for a similar exchange. “Bring forth the best robe and put it on him.” And none of the sons here (except one) loves us as the father does. “The fair mitre” is but the completion of his new dress. Perhaps it alludes (Joshua being the high priest) to the ancient priesthood being fully restored. But all who hereafter walk in fine linen with Christ, are made unto their God kings and priests. What, however, is this “change of raiment” with which the redeemed one appears immediately to be clothed? It is a faith which realizes the righteousness of Christ and so is “imputed unto the believer for righteousness.” It is something more. Raiment is plural. Wherever Christ’s righteousness is imputed a personal righteousness is imparted—upon the principle that “he who doeth righteousness is righteous.” These are distinct garments, but both are worn by every one who is truly saved. “These are they who have come out of much tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Here is the righteousness of

Christ. "To her (the Lamb's wife) it was granted, that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white (fine for texture, clean and white for condition)—for the fine linen is the righteousness of *saints*."

Now look at the other figure. Both represent the same great change: and how different, in the one, filthy garments from fine linen, white and clean; and in the other, a brand burning in the fire from a brand plucked out of it.

It is clearly meant to indicate what our friend said his salvation was—"a narrow escape." (See Amos iv., 11.)

It is plucked out. Ay, and whose is the plucking hand, but His who rules the Universe? "It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth," (though we must both will and run,) "but of God that sheweth mercy." The brand does not come or start out. It is a brand plucked out of the fire—"not of works lest any man should boast." Let alone this brand; yea, let Sovereign grace only not interpose—and it will burn on, until it forms a part of the fire unquenchable!

A strong hand, and a quick one, again is supposed. Ministers, (commonly God's instruments here,) are charged—"Of some have compassion, making a difference, and others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire," or save them *by* fear, rather than see them lost. Rouse all or any of their fears. Ring, if needful, the knell of eternal death in their ears; and be prompt, quick—in showing both their danger and their remedy. There must be a *resolute wisdom* applied in many cases, or *we* are not the instruments of the Author of salvation. As we best *can*, we must seize the object of our care—any victim that we would pull out of a fire: not be too delicate, or gentle, or forbearing—to do good!

An entire and final plucking out is intended; a plucking out to remain out. Surely not to be thrown back again! Man can neither regenerate, nor destroy regeneration in the soul. I am persuaded, "that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." Can any one imagine (under this striking figure) that the brand is plucked out to be thrown back into the fire? No. By whomsoever and however abused, the true and final perseverance of the real believer is here preached. God's sovereignty, too, in "choosing Jerusalem"—mark that!—is the seed, root, and beginning of our subject—the "election" of Jerusalem, in express terms. And by declaring, in the face of Satan, that this is a brand which he has plucked from the fire, he pledges himself, in truth, to keep it out, "through faith, unto salvation." "Ye have not chosen," that is first, "chosen

me," says our Lord to his disciples, "but I have chosen you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain."

II. And now I come to the inquiry, how far all this is applicable to the case of our departed friend, Mr. Clarke? Asking again of you all to follow me attentively, (all experienced Christians especially,) as I offer a few facts respecting him, and enquire candidly and honestly: "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?"

I have sought for the best light on the case which I could obtain. Personally, I only remember to have had one interview of importance with him in his last illness. Of this interview, I learn, that he afterwards spoke frequently. My chief impression of it is, (and I mention it for the encouragement of ministers in this plain course,) that I endeavored to be particularly plain and faithful with him, and that he was deeply attentive. I went to him from another neighbor's death-bed, (that of our late respected Governor,) and was then purposing to take a long journey; so that we did not expect to meet again. We were both in earnest, it seems. He spoke of this interview to several friends, as having "first put him in the right way."

Certainly he now began to seek the forgiveness of his sins; valued the company of Christian friends, and no other; and spoke freely to many of his great anxiety on this point. Was it, at best, a death-bed repentance? And ought I to remind you—I think I ought—of the excellent remark of an experienced minister: "that while true repentance is never too late, late repentance is always difficult to prove true." Still, we have been led to think that there were "fruits meet for repentance" in this case, or such as overcome the difficulty. It has been well observed, that a few such cases there are, that none may despair; but a few, that none may presume.

He acknowledged and lamented his long delay of all attention to religion, and wished others to be warned against similar delay; was ready to humble himself for particular sins, and to acknowledge them to man as well as to God. He spoke of having wholly mistaken what religion was, and that he now was of a totally different mind about it. Once he thought, that to pay all his debts, and be kind to his family and his neighbors, would suffice, but his mind was now wholly changed as to this. Something very different he saw was required. Was not this a true beginning of the brand being plucked from the fire?

He spoke of his salvation, where I gathered these particulars, as being “a narrow escape.”

When, after awhile, he began to profess some hope of salvation, he was asked, how he obtained it? Was it because he deserved such a blessing! Oh! no; he replied. He found he must go to Christ alone; it was for Christ’s sake alone: his hope was in Christ.

Gradually this hope became increased and confirmed. Sometimes he had no doubts or fears of his acceptance, he said; but “sometimes they would come in.” That he “clapped his hands for joy” at one time, in thinking of his state—assured “he had found the right way.” I repeat again my text to experienced Christians: Was not this *like* a brand plucked out of the fire?

He now enquired, whether he ought not to be baptised? He much wished to speak of the Saviour he had found; and declared that he only desired to live, to come among you here, at Providence, and be baptised. On this being thought impossible, in his low state of health, he asked whether the Church could not meet at his house, to hear his confession of faith, or what the Lord had done for him? He expressed repeatedly his anxiety to get to this Church “once more,” that he might be baptised.

Brethren, so far as you believe him to have been sincere, you must regard this as a real confession of Christ. He did not want baptism for an entrance, a perfectly regular entrance, into the Church above; however scripturally we may require it for an entrance to the Church below. The question is, did he make enough of baptism, by seeking it to the utmost of his power, after he professed a hope in Christ? We submit to you that he did. We must not, at any time, make too much of it—which is possible; which is always the case, if, with some Pœdobaptists, we make it a passport to heaven; or with the Campbellites, and others, suppose that there is any kind of regenerating or saving virtue, a sort of Romish charm, in the outward ordinance. Both these views of baptism are Popish and very dangerous views.

Our friend much desired the salvation of his family. “Oh, that they could all but meet in heaven, where he expected he was going.” I will not mention particular members of the family, who were much upon his mind. But he did—spoke of himself as a warning to them, in particular, of the evils of delay in religion, and wished this warning to be *urged* upon them by ministers and friends, after his decease. “If they do not come to the public opportunities, let them be spoken to in private,” he said.

Let *that family*, then, in every branch of it, consider this a dispen-

sation peculiarly addressed to them. God makes these family ties and he breaks them, alike in mercy—gives us the father and mother, brother or sister, for whom we are responsible; and takes them away. . . . This is a voice, a last voice, from the grave of a husband and parent. . . .

“Why neglect that which you are commanded to seek first? Did I make my excuses once,” it seems to say, “I found them vain.” Did I delay, and prefer other things, I found it wrong—dangerous; and that it would have been fatally wrong and ruinous, but for special grace, and some special providences. You must not rely on special providences; if you might they would be no longer special.

“Delay was very nigh being my ruin. If persisted in, it will certainly be yours. I had but a short time, at last, for this great work. You may have a shorter, if you leave it to the last, or none at all. You may have no lengthened sickness. Oh! turn and hear God’s voice while it is called to-day.”

To *his friends and neighbors* this dispensation has its voice. He was a kind friend and good neighbor. You know very well what he would now consider the best act of good neighborhood he could perform toward you. To warn every one of you of the evil of his way. Of neglected Sabbaths, and religious opportunities, which you have in abundance; of neglected Bibles, neglected ministers; and you that have families, of all neglect to train them up well; that is in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Of all intemperate habits; profane language; ungoverned passions.

To *his Christian friends* here is a voice! Both of warning and encouragement. “Be not content with the form of godliness,” it would say to you—“your baptism or church-membership. *They* could not have saved me. Sometimes, when I saw Christians worldly, spiritually idle and indifferent, drinking or covetous, they injured me—you injured me, so far as guilty of any of these things, *much!* I was blind, but you “put a stumbling block in the way of the blind,” which was the most cruel thing you could do to him, as a fellow traveller to eternity, and which you are commanded not to do! Oh! cease all of you from all this, with regard to the poor blind souls still found in numbers around you!

“But be encouraged too,” our friend would say. He lived to love you notwithstanding your faults—to love you more than ever! It was his greatest sorrow at last, that he could not follow in your delightful Christian ways; your holy baptism; holy communion at the Lord’s table; holy love of one another; and to help to stir you up to love all perishing souls, and to do every thing possible for them.

Be encouraged. There are more brands in the fire. Pray for more wisdom, more courage, more faith—above all, for more faithfulness, to your own souls and theirs, and you shall be instrumental in plucking some of them out! Let ministers be more than ever plain; and give no uncertain sound as to their danger, to sinners without or within the Church. *Shew* the people their transgressions; make plain to them, personally, their sins—both publicly (as Paul) and “from house to house.”

And remember one thing. The Christian, who mingles sinfully with the world, is said in Scripture to “handle pitch,” and is asked how he can do this and not be defiled? Now, you know, that if a man were to attempt plucking brands out of a fire, while his hands were smeared with pitch—it would be dangerous work; he would soon give it over. And this is the great reason why the Church, does not succeed sometimes, in gaining the world. Her hands are smeared with worldliness, worldly pitch and pollution. Cleanse your hands, then, brethren; purify your hearts; and God will give you reasonable success, both in your present and all future meetings. To him that is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. AMEN.

